Islanders at War

After Rabaul was occupied by Japanese troops on 23 January 1942, the islands of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate to the south-east were the next target for conquest by the mighty Japanese Empire. The tide of Japan’s expansion in the Pacific reached Faisi and the Shortland Islands in the northern Solomons on 31 March 1942. By early May, Japanese forces had occupied Tulagi, the official seat of the protectorate, and the neighbouring islets of Gavutu and Tanambogo. In July, Japanese troops landed on Guadalcanal and began the construction of an airfield. The establishment of a Japanese airfield on Guadalcanal was a disturbing development for Allied intelligence; it would threaten American supply routes to Australia and New Zealand, and pose a direct security threat to the United States Pacific Fleet’s seaboard communication lines to India and the Persian Gulf (Feldt 1991: xvii–xviii). To counter these threats, the United States First Marine Division under the command of Major General Alexander Vandegrift landed on Guadalcanal and Tulagi on 7 August 1942. The Japanese airfield, which was near completion, was captured on the following day and named Henderson Field after a United States flyer killed at the Battle of Midway (Lord 1977: 37–8). This amphibious landing marked the beginning of the ‘Battle of the Solomons’ or the ‘Solomons Campaign’, which lasted more than six months and included a long series of hard-fought land, air and sea battles. This chapter aims to show how islanders were absorbed in the Allied effort of the campaign and to put into perspective the part they played as well as the significance of their contributions to the eventual Allied victory.
The coastwatching network

In order to understand the efforts of islanders in the Solomon Islands Campaign, it is necessary to put the Royal Australian Navy’s coastwatching network into context. Almost immediately after World War I, Captain C.J. Clare, a district naval officer in Western Australia, proposed a national security initiative: a secret intelligence network that would engage civilians residing in coastal areas of Australia to gather intelligence on any subversive or suspicious developments and activities in their surroundings. Captain Clare’s suggestion resulted in a staff paper that was submitted to the chief of staff at the navy headquarters in Melbourne. The paper strategically suggested that the proposed security scheme should not be limited to Australia but should also be extended to include the Australian colonial territories of Papua and New Guinea, and the British-administered Solomon Islands. It was observed that these islands north and north-east of Australia would be vulnerable if foreign powers were to launch an attack on Australia, and would likely be the first crown soil in harm’s way. Lieutenant Commander Eric Feldt, the head of this network at the outbreak of World War II in the Pacific, saw this area north-east of Australia as a ‘fence’ with many gates to guard (Lord 1977: 7). Feldt was aware of the gaps in surveillance along this vast fence and first envisioned them filled by coastwatchers, choosing the code name ‘Ferdinand’ for the proposed network of personnel. Ferdinand the Bull was the title character in a popular children’s book by Munro Leaf, initially published in 1936. Feldt recalled:

I chose Ferdinand … who did not fight but sat under a tree and just smelled the flowers. It was meant as a reminder to Coastwatchers that it was not their duty to fight and so draw attention to themselves, but to sit circumspectly and unobtrusively, gathering information. Of course, like their titular prototype, they could fight if they were stung (Feldt 1991: 95).

By December 1941, when the United States of America declared war on Japan, the coastwatching network was already well established and encompassed much of the south-west Pacific. Over 100 coastwatchers were stationed in a 2,500-mile arc from the western end of the Territory of New Guinea, through Papua and the Solomons, to the New Hebrides. Most of these coastwatchers soon found themselves behind enemy lines. Equipped with very heavy wireless radios and supported by local scouts, they moved from place to place seeking vantage points and radioing
information back to Resident Commissioner William Marchant on Malaita, where it was further communicated to Port Vila and from there on to the South Pacific Area and South West Pacific Area commands.

There were 23 coastwatching stations in the Solomons group, extending from Bougainville in the north-west to San Cristobal in the south-east (Figure 3). Of all the coastwatchers, only Hugh Wheatley, Harry Wickham and Geoffrey Kuper were Solomon Islanders, and they were of mixed-race origin. The rest were European: district officers of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, plantation owners and managers and missionaries. But whether black or white, they all had in common considerable knowledge of local culture, traditions, environment and people — the knowledge that was essential for intelligence operations behind enemy lines.

In this section, I will focus on the coastwatchers of islander origin, for it was mainly under the coastwatching scheme that islanders served during the campaign. Hugh Wheatley was a native medical practitioner (a British colonial government position) by profession. He was appointed as coastwatcher by Donald Kennedy, district officer for Isabel and the Central Islands. This was a rather informal appointment that was not
approved by the resident commissioner. Perhaps Kennedy saw the need for a quick expansion of the coastwatching network and so made appointments without consulting his superiors. In early March 1942, Wheatley received reports regarding an outbreak of Spanish influenza in the Shortland Islands. He decided that he should travel to the Shortlands to assess the situation and to treat victims of the disease. He left for the Shortlands with a radio given to him by Kennedy, who had tasked him with extending the coastwatching network while performing his medical duties. Wheatley arrived on the island a day before Japanese troops landed at Faisi. Almost immediately, and before he could participate in the coastwatching network, he was taken prisoner by the Japanese on 6 April 1942. He was later sent to Rabaul as a prisoner of war (Clemens 1998: 42). In September 1942, Wheatley and others were transferred to a Japanese military prison in Rabaul where he continued to provide medical assistance to wounded and sick prisoners of war in the prison facility until his death in May 1944.

More successful in coastwatching than Wheatley was Harry Wickham (Figure 4), a trader and plantation manager residing in Roviana Lagoon. Also appointed a coastwatcher by Kennedy, Wickham became a real asset to the network, engaging in organising islanders for scouting and reconnaissance, participating in the rescue of fallen pilots and seamen, reporting enemy movements and developments and assisting in the evacuation of rescued Allied personnel. Wickham’s coastwatching station at New Georgia became a safe haven for pilots and sailors whose planes had been shot down or vessels sunk by Japanese forces in the vicinity. Although Wickham was active as a coastwatcher until the fighting ended in the Solomons, little of his story is featured in written records. Walter Lord mentions him only in passing, when Wickham met coastwatcher Dick Horton in New Georgia on 23 December 1942. Horton, whose mission was to observe enemy activities on Munda, was relieved to meet up with Wickham. Lord wrote that Wickham ‘knew every foot of the area … if anybody could find the right spot for watching the Japanese at Munda, he would be the one’ (Lord 1977: 123).
Perhaps most remarkable for his efforts as coastwatcher was native medical practitioner Geoffrey Kuper. Like Wheatley and Wickham, Kuper was of mixed race with a Caucasian father and local mother. He was appointed as a coastwatcher by Martin Clemens, district officer on Guadalcanal, and assigned under Kennedy to run the coastwatching station on Isabel Island. Kuper’s role as a coastwatcher was to plan and execute operations with his team of scouts, with the goal of obtaining intelligence information on Japanese movements. Like other coastwatchers, he also organised search and rescue missions, carried out guerrilla attacks against Japanese forces and ensured the safe return of rescued airmen and sailors to Allied bases.

Kuper, who became a regular voice in Allied radio traffic, also liaised with coastwatchers on Bougainville Island to confirm Japanese planes and ships heading towards Guadalcanal to bombard Henderson Field and the Allied headquarters at Lunga. In Bougainville, for example, coastwatcher Paul Mason sighted Japanese planes and transmitted messages to Henderson Field such as ‘forty bombers heading yours’ (Lord 1977: 62). As soon as
the planes were sighted by Kuper and other coastwatchers in the Solomons group, they would also radio Henderson Field to confirm sightings of the reported bombers. Their reports of approaching fighters and destroyers allowed Allied defenders to prepare for attacks. This early warning ensured sufficient time for the Allied bombers to depart the airfield and, more significantly, for Allied fighter planes to gain sufficient height to swoop down on the enemy and launch a surprise counterattack with devastating effects, inflicting catastrophic losses on the Japanese. It also assisted Allied bombers in attacking Japanese convoys supplying their troops on Guadalcanal. The importance of coastwatchers’ contributions to Allied efforts in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate and territories of Papua and New Guinea during the war with Japan is memorialised at the coastwatchers’ lighthouse honour plaque in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea, which bears the inscription: ‘They waited and warned and died that we might live’.

The fact that these three locals were of mixed race enabled them to be appointed coastwatchers, a position of authority over ‘pure-blooded’ islanders in the racialised colonial hierarchy of indigenous administration during the escalation of Japanese military developments in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. Mixed-raced islanders were regarded as inferior to Europeans but above ‘pure’ islanders. Lord wrote about Geoffrey Kuper that ‘given the colonial world of the time, with its rigid racial barriers, there was no place for him in the white planter society of his father’ (Lord 1977: 155). On the other hand, Joyce Wheatley Kevisi recalled that in the western Solomons Harry Wickham brought discomfort to villagers: ‘people were afraid to see him come ashore. They knew that if the Japanese saw him [Harry] with them, they would be in trouble. So they didn’t really welcome Harry’ (WPA 1988: 67–70). These statements showed the betwixt and between position of mixed-race islanders in the British protectorate. Beyond Wheatley, Wickham and Kuper, the highest rank any islander achieved within the colonial interwar administration was second-in-command to a coastwatcher. Locals who obtained this rank included Andrew Langabaea, Bill Bennett, George Maelalo and the celebrated local hero Sergeant Major Jacob Vouza, whose stories will be discussed later in the chapter.
The scouting network

Integral to the coastwatching network were the Solomon Island scouts. Scouts were recruited by district officers and enlisted into the British Solomon Islands Defence Force. The scouting network can be divided into two categories: armed and unarmed scouts. The armed scouts were made up of police constables who had served in the British Solomon Islands Police Force prior to the war. Although not all of them were armed in the early stages of the campaign due to a shortage of rifles, most of them had received some training in handling firearms. According to Martin Clemens, by mid-1942 he had recruited 18 policemen armed with 12 serviceable rifles and only 300 rounds of ammunition. His entire garrison of scouts in Aola comprised 60 able men (Clemens 1998: 44). The unarmed category included scouts who were recruited during the course of war, when the need for swift intelligence reporting increased (ibid.: 17). Enlisting as part of the British Solomon Islands Defence Force enabled scouts to gain a military rank. While armed and unarmed scouts followed different histories, for the purposes of this chapter both will be referred to as ‘scouts’.

As the Japanese advanced into the Solomons, the need to recruit islanders to help coastwatchers in their fight against the invaders became pressing. More Solomon Islanders were recruited to serve in the scouting network. Islanders were engaged in three significant tasks under the network: gathering intelligence, conducting search and rescue missions and guerrilla warfare.

Intelligence gathering

Local scouts were given the perilous task of gathering intelligence on Japanese operations in the islands. Some of the most hazardous operations were conducted during the early phases of the campaign, when the Japanese began construction of the airfield on Guadalcanal. Scouts were sent by their coastwatch commanders to seek employment at the Japanese

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1 By later stages of the campaign, almost all unarmed scouts had been armed with weapons captured from Japanese forces. Clemens (1998: 17) stated that his scouts later collected six extra rifles, 2,500 rounds of ammunition and ‘a number of useful weapons were … captured’.

2 Despite the instructions of ‘Ferdinand’ to only observe and report information, coastwatchers and their scouts often engaged in guerrilla warfare against Japanese troops when they felt the need to protect themselves and their hideouts.
camp at Lunga, and then act as spies for the Allied forces by pretending to be curious civilians. Lieutenant D.S. Macfarlane of the Royal Australian Navy, who was in charge of the coastwatching station at Barande on Guadalcanal, sent his local ‘cook boy’ to Lunga to obtain employment as a labourer. During his time off on weekends, the cook would rush back to Macfarlane and report the number of Japanese personnel, equipment and gun emplacements, and the progress of work at the airfield. Given the low level of education and lack of experience that limited most Solomon Islanders’ ability to provide precise numbers and describe modern artillery and other equipment, other islanders were encouraged to seek work with the Japanese so coastwatchers could compare information and obtain a more accurate report to be relayed up the intelligence line. To obtain accurate counts of personnel, Macfarlane instructed his team of scouts to watch as the Japanese lined up for food and estimate the length of the line. The estimates were far from exact, but sufficient enough to determine enemy strength at Lunga in early 1942. Coastwatcher and Australian veteran of World War I Ashton (Snowy) Rhodes and district officer Martin Clemens also sent their scouts to work for the Japanese forces at Lunga from their respective hideouts. Rhodes’s scouts laboured at the Japanese airfield and bartered food while gathering what information they could on the progress of Japanese development around Lunga. Dressed as villagers, Clemens’s policemen were sent to Tulagi, Gavutu and Tanambogo to gather information on enemy development. However, little was obtained from Clemens’s initiative to spy on Tulagi since Japanese forces discouraged local visits to their camps (Feldt 1991: 112).

The quest for intelligence continued, however, as islanders masqueraded as willing civilian helpers. They would help Japanese soldiers to unload cargo and military equipment by day, slipping away into the jungle at night to report back their findings. Clemens reported that one of his scouts returned from a reconnaissance mission with unusually detailed intelligence. When Clemens asked how he could make so accurate a report, the scout replied, ‘I wanted to know exactly what they got, so I helped them unload it’ (COI 1946: 19). A similar intelligence-gathering method was used by Mostyn Kiokilo, one of Geoffrey Kuper’s prominent scouts to whom the Allied forces owed a great debt. Mostyn often pretended to be a civilian, gathering the best fresh fruits and vegetables he could find and taking them to the Japanese seaplane base at Rakata Bay as gifts to Lieutenant Yoneda, commander of the base. His friendly approach earned him the trust of Yoneda, who willingly showed him gun emplacements
and revealed the strength of his force. According to Walter Lord (1977: 166), ‘Mostyn had won the confidence of Lieutenant Yoneda … and his information was regularly used by the Henderson Field bombers’. After each Allied bombing raid, Mostyn would return to the Rakata Bay camp to sympathise with Yoneda while assessing the damage caused by Allied bombers. This reveals how courageous and cunning scouts were.

Ordinary villagers also actively participated in intelligence gathering throughout Solomon Islands. Villagers who lived in coastal areas were expected to report any unusual sightings or events in their surrounding areas. Many Solomon Islanders provided invaluable assistance to Allied forces in this manner. It is possible that some forms of collaboration took place in circumstances where friendly relationships were developed between Japanese soldiers and islanders. However, there is no record of this occurring, except in the case of native medical practitioner George Bogese, who was captured by Japanese forces on Tulagi and forced to collaborate by translating Japanese notices to the local vernacular of his home island of Isabel.3

One of the notable stories of how intelligence was gathered by islanders was the story of Bingiti, a villager who led scouting activities around Nggela (Florida) Islands, 25 miles east of Guadalcanal and 35 miles west of Auki on Malaita. Despite this considerable distance of open ocean, Bingiti paddled his canoe from Nggela to Auki to report Japanese activities at Tulagi, or at times sent his fellow scouts to do the job. Bingiti and his men relayed detailed information that was of great assistance to Resident Commissioner Marchant at his headquarters in Auki, eager to know the situation at Tulagi. Clemens claimed that Bingiti’s ‘detailed intelligence was first class’ (1998: 123). Here is an example from a report by Bingiti relayed by radio from Clemens to Marchant in Auki:

Following is a reliable report, not rumour. Tulagi residency not occupied. Flag flies from resident commissioner’s office which is main Jap control centre. Superior officials live there together with several clerks. The sentries on government wharf are the only guard on Island. Alarm sounded by whistle. Estimated that 500 Japs camped on Island. Estimate

prepared by actual counting. One ‘usual’ [Kawanisi]\(^4\) anchored near government wharf, other five anchored at Gavutu where Jap garrison of similar number remain under flag erected on top of island. All European establishments round the harbour and within easy reach have been ransacked but are now no longer occupied. Japs have not treated Nggelese well and they will not now work for them. Every time they visit a village Japs haul out the villagers’ trunks and boxes and pinch their clothing. Supplies of food are being obtained by menace of arms. Launch went to Auriligo plantation last Monday, but doubt whether they got any as all cattle were driven into the bush long ago. Nggelese are cooperating to the extent that they have been telling the Japanese that all white men have gone. As regards to same, Japs told natives that they were short of food and clothing and that they were coming to collect pigs, fowls and produce from their gardens. They also let it be known that they were short of fuel oil and petrol. No further news from practitioners to attend their wounded, of which there are large numbers. Japs told Nggelese to clear out and run away to another island as they would require all food that was being produced (Clemens 1998: 124).

Such information immensely assisted the coastwatchers and other Allied forces in assessing Japan’s military strength and predicting its activities throughout Solomon Islands. It also provides an insight into indigenous people’s relationships to the occupying Japanese force. Ill treatment of islanders by Japanese soldiers such as the demanding of food and property at the point of a gun was not the best approach to building a relationship with islanders. The coastwatchers were aware that islander knowledge was important for successful military operations on the islands. Hence, it was to the Allies’ advantage that the Japanese troops on Nggela mistreated the islanders, for such ill treatment spurred the rise of anti-Japanese resentment among islanders. Elsewhere in Solomon Islands during the course of the war, resentment towards Japanese looting gardens and demanding food at gunpoint continued to spread among the local populace, to the extent that in Western District the population was entirely pro-Allied, which greatly enhanced the chances for survival of Allied personnel in enemy territory (Belshaw 1950: 142). This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

\(^4\) Kawanisi was the name of a Japanese aircraft manufacturer during World War II, producing a range of flying boats and floatplanes. Islanders had insufficient knowledge to distinguish between different Japanese aircraft but were trained by coastwatchers to identify aircraft according to different countries. Therefore, it is possible that any floating aircraft belonging to Japanese forces would be called a *kawanisi*. 
One of the local scouts who sparked great admiration among Allied troops was Sergeant Major Jacob Vouza of the British Solomon Islands Defence Force. Vouza was a policeman who had just retired after serving on Malaita. Not long after he returned to his village on Guadalcanal, the Japanese landed on Tulagi. Being a respected figure in his village and having acquired the status of ‘big man’ from his work as a policeman, Vouza went to Aola on the north-east coast to visit district officer Clemens, offering his services and inquiring what he could do for his government. Clemens instructed Vouza to organise and facilitate the scouting network in his area, east of present-day Honiara. Vouza's arm of the scouting network functioned as effectively as that of any of the coastwatchers throughout the islands, up to and after the Americans landed on Guadalcanal.

On 19 August 1942, Vouza brought an Allied pilot who had been rescued by his scouts to the United States Marines beachhead at Lunga. Because of his status as ‘headman’, Vouza was given a tour of the American camp at Lunga by the marine intelligence officer. To ensure that Vouza would be able to return to the camp without being accosted by Allied sentries, he was given an American flag to wave as a means of identification every time he approached the camp. He was also given a scouting assignment.

On his way, Vouza realised that carrying the American flag could be dangerous, so he decided to hide the flag in his village and recover it on his return from his mission. Vouza changed course to his village, but ran into a Japanese patrol and was immediately captured and interrogated. Vouza agreed to lead the Japanese troops to the Americans. Having toured the marine base at Lunga, he knew that his captors could not match their strength, so he decided that taking them there would be like leading them into a trap. But Vouza’s condition was deteriorating as he had been bayoneted by the Japanese soldiers during interrogation. Vouza and his captors reached the marine lines at Lunga Point just after midnight on 20 August 1942, provoking a strong response from the Americans. The ensuing ‘Battle of Tenaru’ put the Japanese troops into disarray, which gave Vouza the opportunity to escape into the Allied perimeter where his life was saved by American field medics.5

5 John Innes, Guide to the Guadalcanal Battle Field (2012). Note that in published histories, Vouza was represented as being tortured by the Japanese and left to die, then struggling on his own to the American lines (see also Tregaskis 1943: 112–34). Vouza recalled that he led the Japanese to Lunga and, when shooting broke out between the two forces, he escaped into the American perimeter, badly wounded from Japanese interrogation (John Innes, Guadalcanal Battlefield Tour (DVD), 2012). A DVD copy of John Innes’ documentary can be obtained from the Solomon Scouts and Coastwatchers Trust, Honiara.
Vouza’s story is an example of the courage of local scouts, as well as the risks they took in order to gather intelligence for the Allies. Vouza’s actions precipitated one of the bloodiest battles of the campaign (and one of the most costly for the Japanese). He received a number of medals from the Allies, including the Silver Star Medal and Legion of Merit from the United States and the George Cross from the United Kingdom. In 1992, a monument was erected in his honour by the American Battle Monuments Commission; it stands at the entrance to the Royal Solomon Islands Prison at Rove in Honiara.

Search and rescue missions

For both the Japanese and Allied troops, survival in the tropical jungle environment under war conditions was nearly impossible. As Judith Bennett (2009: 15) wrote, ‘the environment threatened strangers’. Almost half of the Allied servicemen who perished during the battle for the Solomons lost their lives to malaria, dysentery, dengue fever and other tropical diseases. However, the numbers were much higher among Japanese troops, who often starved because Allied forces inflicted damage on Japanese convoys. On Guadalcanal, the Japanese Lieutenant Akogina noted, ‘I killed some ants and ate them, they really tasted good’ (ibid.). Another Japanese soldier wrote in his diary before he died that ‘there is no sympathy in the jungle’ (ibid.). These descriptions signify the difficulty of surviving in the tropical environment, particularly for downed pilots and beached sailors.

Despite the slim chances that an Allied pilot or sailor had if they became stranded in enemy territory, their knowledge of the scouting network gave a major boost to their morale. Many of these pilots and sailors were rescued by islanders, some in very bad condition.

When American forces occupied Guadalcanal and Nggela, Japanese forces retreated north-west to New Georgia, the Treasury Islands and as far as Bougainville Island. But this movement did not mean they abandoned Henderson Field. The Japanese made several attempts to retake the airfield, resulting in fierce air and naval battles taking place in New Georgia and the surrounding waters. These battles resulted in many pilots and sailors on both sides having their planes shot down or ships

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6 Inscriptions on Vouza’s monument. Rove Police Headquarters, Honiara.
sunk. Most of those who survived found themselves left behind in enemy territory. However, search and rescue missions organised by coastwatchers and carried out by local scouts saw a number of Allied personnel returned to Guadalcanal to continue fighting. These search and rescue accomplishments have been mainly credited to coastwatchers and scouts, but ordinary villagers also shared in this endeavour. Indeed, although the network was coordinated by the coastwatchers, the bulk of the rescue efforts themselves were carried out by Solomon Islanders (COI 1946: 33).

At least 321 Allied airmen and 280 United States sailors were rescued behind enemy lines during the Solomon Islands Campaign (Feldt 1991: 153). Notable among those rescued was Lieutenant John F. Kennedy, who later became president of the United States, and his PT-109 (patrol torpedo boat) crew. On the night of 1 August 1943, Lieutenant Kennedy and PT-109, among 14 other PT boats, were sent on a reconnaissance mission to Blackett Strait, south of Kolombangara Island. The purpose of the mission was to guard the strait, and engage, disrupt and damage the ‘Tokyo Express’ should it navigate through ‘the Slot’ (New Georgia Sound) to reinforce the Japanese on Guadalcanal.7 In the early hours of the morning, the Japanese destroyer Amagiri loomed out of the darkness only 300 yards from PT-109’s starboard bow. Before Kennedy and his crew could launch a torpedo, the Amagiri rammed the PT-109, throwing Kennedy and his crew overboard. Patrick McMahon, the engineer of the boat, was badly burnt in the collision. The PT-109 crew were helpless in enemy territory; firing a flare to attract possible rescue was not an option. Their only chance of survival was to swim for the shore, over 3 miles from their current location. However, the chance of being found and rescued by a scout gave them hope of returning to base alive. Lieutenant Kennedy and his crew swam for the shore, towing their wounded comrades (Lord 1977: 255–75).

Four days after the crash, local scouts Eroni Kumana and Biuku Gasa — working under coastwatcher and Royal Australian Navy Sub-Lieutenant Arthur Evans who manned the coastwatching post at Kolombangara — found Kennedy and his crew. Kennedy was searching for a piece of paper to scribble a message to the nearest coastwatcher when Kumana gave him a coconut husk instead. Impressed by Kumana’s resourcefulness, Kennedy

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7 The ‘Tokyo Express’ was a nickname used by United States forces to refer to Japanese convoys, which often travelled through New Georgia Sound (also known as the Slot) towards the southern Solomons to deliver supplies and reinforcements to Japanese forces.
inscribed a message on the husk: ‘NAURO ISL … COMMANDER … NATIVE KNOWS POSIT … HE CAN PILOT … 11 ALIVE … NEED SMALL BOAT … KENNEDY’ (Figure 5; Gasa and Kumana 1988: 88).8

Kumana and Gasa returned to Evans with the message. The rescue of Kennedy and his crew took place on the night of 7 August 1943; by the next morning, the PT-109 crew safely reached the United States base at Rendova. After the war, Kumana recalled Lieutenant McMahon’s burns and mentioned that they dug a small hole and covered him in leaves from a buni tree. He recalled: ‘When he saw us he stood up and shook

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8 When Kennedy became president he kept the coconut husk on his desk in the Oval Office. It is now archived by the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston.
our hands and cried’ (WPA 1988: 21–3). Biuku Gasa, the other scout, recalled that two of Kennedy’s crew told them ‘not to shake hands with the others since some of them were badly burnt from the collision’ (ibid.: 33–9). It was only due to the practice of regular patrols that Kennedy’s team were rescued in time since the condition of the crewmen wounded in the collision was rapidly deteriorating.

Guerrilla warfare

Another significant aspect of scouting was guerrilla warfare. Young island men won pride and achievement in a wide array of unconventional combat. The realisation that coastwatchers relied on their knowledge of the island environment enhanced these attitudes, and islanders’ ability to masquerade as curious civilians became an asset to coastwatchers masterminding guerrilla actions against Japanese troops. Almost all Solomon Islanders who assisted in coastwatching activities found themselves engaged in guerrilla combat. One remarkable case was Donald Kennedy’s Army, led by Sergeant William (Bill) Bennett of the British Solomon Islands Defence Force. The ‘Army’ comprised 28 scouts and a team of carriers (Figure 6). Bennett stated: ‘every time a report came Kennedy and I would sit down at a table and plan what to do and how to do it … We only picked those [Japanese patrols] that we knew we could kill … If a Japanese patrol was beyond our capability to kill we just left them alone’ (Bennett 1988: 141).

Bennett, who was heralded in published histories for his bravery as a scout, recalled an occasion when six Japanese soldiers with well-equipped radios arrived in Seghe. Scouts had reported sighting the Japanese patrol group and Allied forces had been trying to ambush them for several days to no avail. Bennett gathered 12 scouts and asked Kennedy for permission to hunt down the six Japanese. Permission was granted and a prize of a case of cigarettes was promised to the scouts if they caught the Japanese soldiers. Bennett recalled:

We left at about five o’clock. It was not very far from where we were staying, only about a mile by canoe. We kept on walking and by six o’clock the next morning we were there. Then I sniffed the air and I could smell them because their body odour was very distinct in the jungle …

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9 Eroni (Aaron) Kumana, still alive in 2013, maintained a relationship with the former United States president’s family. He was also often visited by tourists and built a monument to honour his own war effort and friendship with JFK.
I walked slowly and quietly and directly ahead of me were the six soldiers. They were packing their belongings and were about to leave ... we shot them all. We buried them properly, took their guns, their radios, and documents. Kennedy was very happy. Then right away the big box of cigarettes arrived (Bennett 1988: 143).

Bennett recalled that his army of scouts accounted for over 100 Japanese killed and 82 captured without any losses on their side. The coastwatchers’ tactic of giving rewards to islanders greatly aided in maintaining morale among indigenous people and promoting healthy competition among the islanders, with the added motivation of winning a prize for successfully performing a task. The reward of acquiring rifles from their victims seemed to be a particular lure for local participation in guerrilla skirmishes. In another remarkable event, Steven Vinale Zaku, a scout from Isabel Island under coastwatcher Geoffrey Kuper’s command, recalled his experience of a guerrilla hunt for 25 Japanese aboard a barge at San Jorge Island. His party of scouts reached San Jorge shortly after the boat left, but they followed it until they reached Mufu village on Isabel where the Japanese unit stopped to revive. As Zaku recalled:
When morning came, we saw 6 men coming on patrol. They were coming ahead and we thought about capturing [them] because our orders said to do that. But the orders didn’t say to take prisoners. The orders were to kill them but we thought about capturing them because if we shot them some of the others staying with the boat would hear the shots and come ready to fight. That’s why we wanted to capture them so we could kill them quietly (Zaku et al. 1988: 158).

Zaku and his fellow scouts initiated a plot to wipe out all 25 Japanese. They first decided to invite a six-man Japanese patrol for some food. The plot was to launch an attack while the Japanese were eating. Zaku stated the Japanese wanted to hold on to their guns but Sergeant Tanisapa persuaded them to put their guns aside for the meal. While they were eating, another scout took all the guns and escaped. As soon as a signal was given, Zaku and his comrades attacked and killed the six Japanese soldiers. They then ambushed and killed the remaining soldiers as well. Zaku and his team engaged in a remarkable campaign of guerrilla fighting. Their exploits generated a significant mystery for Japanese forces and after the war resulted in a 1973 expedition to search for the missing 25 Japanese. Although the mystery of the never-recovered barge gave hope to the expedition team that there could be survivors, their search resulted in disappointment as none were found. Zaku’s story, like those of other scouts who participated in guerrilla warfare, provides a glimpse into guerrilla activities during the campaign. Their stories have provided crucial explanations for missing Japanese units (Pacific Islands Monthly 1973: 6).

In a traditional society where a death was usually compensated for by reciprocal bloodshed, many Solomon Islanders, like Daniel Kalea, felt compelled to join the war. Daniel was from the highlands of Guadalcanal and a father of four children. His wife was killed by Japanese forces during operations on Guadalcanal in mid-1942. Daniel enlisted as a scout (Figure 7) and was earmarked to work alongside the United States Marine raiders on Guadalcanal. In traditional Solomon Islands societies, tribal fighting was very common. Although the influence of Christianity and the establishment of British administration over the islands had curbed traditional practices of warfare, traditional cultural attitudes were still engraved in people’s minds. In the case of Daniel, whose wife was killed by an enemy on which he could take revenge with impunity, the opportunity to avenge his loss on Japanese troops was an easy choice. Driven by rage over his wife’s death, Daniel engaged in his own private quest for vengeance in guerrilla skirmishes.
Figure 7: Daniel Kalea
Source: United States National Archives.
South Pacific Scouts

Besides the informal scouting network, some islanders also joined military units, particularly the South Pacific Scouts, which predominantly comprised Pacific islanders from Fiji, Tonga and the British Solomon Islands. Prior to Japan’s invasion of the British protectorate headquarters at Tulagi, a defence force composed predominantly of Solomon Islanders was formed and trained by personnel of a detachment of the Australian Imperial Force manning a base at Tanambogo (Figure 8). The force consisted of a European commanding officer, a local warrant officer and 112 islanders of other ranks. Major Vivian Fox-Strangways, the commanding officer, had been in the Solomons for only a fortnight. He had been appointed resident commissioner for the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, but upon his arrival he found that the colony had been invaded by Japanese troops. From there, Fox-Strangways was commissioned to the rank of major and sent to administer the newly formed defence force at Tulagi. His task was to train islanders to use weapons that most of them had never seen before. But there was a problem: stocks of weaponry on hand were old and not sufficient to equip a military force. Fox-Strangways made a formal complaint to the British Solomon Islands Protectorate and gave suggestions for weaponry assistance (COI 1946: 10). His suggestions were never considered and the continual Japanese raids at Tulagi and the nearby islets of Gavutu and Tanambogo escalated, resulting in the complete evacuation of Fox-Strangways’s command. Even if his suggestions had been considered, his request for more weapons for his force of islanders would likely not have been granted. The Japanese assaults on Pearl Harbor and Singapore diverted Allied attention and Tulagi was of least concern at that time. On 2 May 1942, the Royal Australian Air Force and Australian Imperial Force detachment base at Tanambogo was evacuated and its equipment returned to Australia. The newly formed defence force was also dispersed but training was later reinforced elsewhere in the Solomons.

In spite of the failed attempt to form a defence force, the brief military training provided by Fox-Strangways had given the islanders involved basic knowledge in handling a gun. Although most of the islanders from the dispersed force returned to their villages, some attached themselves to coastwatchers as scouts and others later formed the nucleus (alongside Fijians and other Pacific islanders) of a guerrilla army — formally known to American forces as the ‘South Pacific Scouts’, to its members it was called the ‘International Brigade’, in a reference to the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s (COI 1946: 54).
Some of the islanders who later become part of the South Pacific Scouts were initially recruited on Malaita to assist American forces in reconnaissance work on Guadalcanal. This group of Malaitan men was known as the ‘service battalion’ (Marchant 1943a). Colin Larsen, one of the few writers who mention this battalion, refers to it as the ‘Dukwasi unit’.\textsuperscript{10} The unit, according to Larsen (1946: 99), was reorganised and substantially reduced as it was evidently unable to operate effectively as a separate unit, hence needing to be attached to a better trained and organised unit. When attached to other units, it could be used effectively for scouting and patrol work.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{10} Dukwasi is a term in my native language of Kwara’ae that means ‘wild jungle’. It is also the name of a village in central Kwara’ae on Malaita.
\textsuperscript{11} Although this was the reason for reorganising the unit, George Maelalo’s (1988: 178) recollection indicates the unit served in frontline battle alongside the Fijians, Tongans and New Zealanders.
\end{flushright}
George Maelalo was among 22 Solomon Islands men attached to the 1st Reconnaissance Company, Fiji Guerrillas. This company was commanded by Captain Charlie Tripp, and the Solomon Islander unit was led by Lieutenant Len Barrow of the British Solomon Islands Defence Force. The unit fought alongside Allied forces in New Georgia and later in Bougainville as fighting shifted west of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. In his recollection of events, Maelalo downplayed his considerable bravery when he volunteered for a mission to destroy a Japanese radar and radio installation on a hill at Sorokina in Bougainville. Maelalo recalled that some American and Australian soldiers attempted to blow up the radar but never returned from their mission. When his superiors called for a volunteer, Maelalo stepped forward with the intent of representing his comrades and proving his ability as a Solomon Islander soldier. He destroyed the radar, making way for Allied troops to capture one of the Japanese strongholds on Bougainville. While Maelalo claimed in his oral recollection that his choice to volunteer for the mission was to prove the ability of his fellow islanders and display their knowledge of the environment (Maelalo 1988: 178), it is worth noting that his motivation to volunteer reflects a common ‘rite of passage’ among young men in the traditional societies of Solomon Islands, an issue that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Maelalo’s accomplishment shows that islanders who served in frontline units took the same risks that other Allied forces took, and suffered the same challenges that other units experienced in fighting throughout Solomon Islands and beyond. Maelalo recalled that on Bougainville the Islander Company worked tirelessly to build an airstrip for an airlift of dead and wounded soldiers: ‘We built the airfield with our own bare hands. We dug trees with shovels and axes’ (ibid.: 194). Of the 23 Solomon Islanders who served with the South Pacific Scouts, only seven, including Maelalo, were still alive when hostilities ended in 1945 (ibid.: 179). Despite Maelalo’s actions, and the legacy of those islanders who sacrificed their lives for the Allied cause, their efforts have gone unrecognised for many years and have been submerged under the dominant narratives of outsider perspectives. This has influenced understandings of islanders’ efforts in the war and the information that has been passed down into the contemporary Solomon Islands.
Communications and logistics

In any military campaign, effective communication is essential. This was the case between the coastwatchers and Allied forces in the Solomon Islands Campaign. To achieve effective communication over great distances, scouts were appointed in each major village to transmit information as quickly as possible. The process of communication in this sense can be classified into two categories: the approach to relaying unclassified information to coastwatchers, and the network of communication between coastwatchers that islanders facilitated. The indigenous approach was simple: if a Japanese patrol or unit was sighted in the bush, the information would be reported to the chief in the nearest village. The chief would swiftly send a scout or other able person on to the next village, and the pattern would continue until news reached the nearest coastwatcher. Scouts were instructed by coastwatchers in the manner of transmitting information. For relaying written letters and classified information among coastwatchers, a trusted scout would be assigned the responsibility. The ability of scouts to move through and between enemy lines at short notice to facilitate communication enormously aided coastwatching efforts and Allied operations throughout the British protectorate. Coastwatchers and Allied personnel were well aware of their reliance on local support of communications throughout the islands (Tadangoana 2011). Communication among coastwatchers was complicated in enemy-dominated territory, but was nevertheless maintained. Martin Clemens’s network of communication was extended to every village under his administration along the coast of Guadalcanal. He recorded in his diary:

"every coastal village had formed a home guard section, which was responsible for reporting any enemy or strange activity along the coast … Another important duty all villagers accepted — I could hardly force them to take it on — was feeding any of my chaps passing their way, and furnishing runners to pass on written messages. This service helped immeasurably to ensure that information reached me as soon as possible (Clemens 1998: 113–14)."

Being in a foreign land during a war could generate insecurity and suspicion of indigenous allegiance. Clemens was aware that his life would be at stake if islanders chose to reveal his location to the Japanese or decided to switch allegiances. He incorporated village chiefs and headmen into his intelligence network. This aided his own peace of mind, and to
ensure the reliability of the local communication system he passed a test message from one home guard section to the next, across his area of Guadalcanal from Aola as far as Rere in the east. The incorporation of traditional village leaders in the network was a significant aspect in the success of Clemens’s intelligence gathering, and it proved to be a workable system among coastwatchers throughout the Solomon Islands (Figure 9).

Clemens wrote in his diary that the response he got from his scouts was always prompt, and he acknowledged that ‘there was little doubt my chaps were on the job’ (Clemens 1998: 134). But an incident occurred towards the end of June 1942 that showed how islanders were risking their lives while running Clemens’s communications. A scout arrived at Clemens’s outpost at Paripao with a letter of complaint from Bishop Aubin at the Marist mission headquarters at Visale. Aubin feared that a rumour was circulating among the local population that he was pro-Japanese. Clemens replied to Aubin and sent his scout Chimi to deliver the letter. But Chimi was also instructed to spy on Japanese developments at Lunga while on
his way. Chimi was aware that if he was caught by Japanese and they
found he was carrying a letter, he would be killed. And, indeed, it was
a task that almost claimed Chimi’s life: he was spotted by the Japanese at
Lunga as he sneaked between the neat rows of plantation coconuts; while
being chased, he destroyed the letter. Although he managed to evade
his pursuers by slipping away into a swamp (ibid.: 146), Chimi’s story
is one of a number of testimonials by islanders of the risks they took as
messengers while ensuring the effective functioning of the coastwatching
network.

In the western Solomons, John Kari’s encounter with fallen American
pilots exemplifies how ordinary civilians could become involved as
messengers in a campaign not of their making. Kari was from Hopongo
village on Rendova Island. In the 1920s, he attended Kokeqola Wesley
United College at Munda on New Georgia. As a young, educated and
ambitious man, he worked his way up to become a missionary teacher.
His first encounter with Allied forces was when an American fighter plane
was shot down by a Japanese Zero near his village at Hopongo. The two
pilots survived the crash and swam ashore. Kari was the educated elite
of his local society and one of the few islanders in his district who could
speak English. Therefore, when the pilots were found, news reached him
quickly and he approached the pilots in order to determine whether they
were friend or foe. After a few questions, he concluded the pilots were
Americans. But his guests were uncertain of his association with Allied
forces, so he decided to assure them by showing a charter of a welfare
society he had founded in 1930. Relieved and impressed by what they
heard, the pilots donated US$30 to his initiative. But Kari could not
imagine that the money presented to him would result in a three-month
jail term in Seghe. News of the rescued pilots and the donation reached
Donald Kennedy’s coastwatching station at Seghe. Kari was called to
bring the pilots to Seghe and, shortly after the pilots left for Henderson
Field, Kari found himself in court for accepting a charity donation from
the Americans. Kennedy may have viewed the generosity of Allied soldiers
as a threat to colonial control over islanders. Therefore, detaining Kari
would signal to other islanders that accepting gifts from Allied soldiers
was not acceptable and would incur penalties. Kari recalled, ‘I didn’t
get whipped but he [Kennedy] said I would have to stay at Seghe for 3
months’ (Clemens 1998: 146). Kari’s punishment was to remain at Seghe
and work as a scout. He was then sent back to Hopongo with orders
from Kennedy to set up a messenger post between coastwatchers Evans
at Kolombangara and Horton at Rendova. People from Hopongo and
nearby villages reported to him, and he would send messengers to report to Evans and Horton. Despite his unfair treatment, John Kari remained a reliable messenger who facilitated communication networks between Evans and Horton, and accommodated other stranded Allied personnel rescued by his fellow villagers. His gallant efforts earned him the United States Medal of Freedom, and were further recognised in a letter from the secretary of the navy in Washington DC:

For exceptional meritorious conduct in the performance of service to the Government of the United States in effecting the escape of a Marine Corps Aviator and his air crewman who had been forced down off Baniata Point, Rendova Island, 1 November, 1942. Gallantly going to the rescue of the downed airmen in defiance of watchful Japanese garrisoned in the vicinity, Kari not only attended to the physical well-being of the two marines but guarded against detection by the Japanese while making detailed plans for the difficult journey by canoes and throughout the long and hazardous trip, Kari not only prevented their capture by Japanese forces but also was responsible for their return to a place of safety. His heroic conduct, fearless initiative and loyalty to Allied survivors of combat reflect the highest credit upon Kari and the friendly civilians of the islands who rendered valiant and unselfish service throughout this perilous mission (Laracy and White 1988: 104).

Like John Kari, Daniel Gua was also a student at Kokeqola College. He volunteered for scouting at Kennedy’s request. He and his fellow villagers’ job was to deliver letters to coastwatchers. He recalled:

Every night we paddled. Down to Duke, Bilua, Simbo and Ranonga … many of the letters were from Seghe to Vonunu, where the minister there Sylvester, was the Coastwatcher too. This was before Josselyn came down from Tulagi to be the Coastwatcher. We took all the reports from headmen and these Coastwatchers in between and back and forth (WPA 1988: 87–94).

Other scouts were also involved as messengers. In an oral testimonial, Solomon Alu, a scout at Denggio in the western Solomons recalled that ‘messages and letters went so fast … we had two boys on the shore, in case any messages came at night, they would run up the hill with them’ (WPA 1988: 16–17). Scouts who were assigned to the communication routes were well aware of the urgency of their tasks. Micah Mae recalled his involvement as a sentry and messenger to Josselyn: ‘We didn’t sleep at night. When a letter came we would go’ (ibid.: 20). The efforts of messengers did not go unacknowledged. Kennedy noted in his coastwatching report:
Constant communication with both [Josselyn and Horton] was maintained, not only by teleradios, but also by native canoe patrols, and by this latter means mails and valuable sketches and maps were sent to Sehge to be picked up by Catalina aircraft from Halabo which began to land in Sehge channel in December (Kennedy 1943: 5).

The Solomon Islands Campaign became an Allied battle against two different opponents: the mighty Japanese Empire and the difficult environment. To those coastwatchers who remained behind enemy lines, it was a matter of surviving each day. But islanders knew their environment: it was their home. If anyone could navigate the tropical terrain, it would be the islander. Therefore, indigenous involvement in the coastwatching network became fundamental to its success. Two important ways that islanders supported the logistical mission were the movement of materials and supplies by canoes and carriers. Indigenous canoes and carriers provided not only a ready means of transportation of supplies between islands, among coastwatchers and across mountains, but also of delivering rescued Allied personnel to coastwatching posts and inserting patrol missions along coastlines (see Figure 10 for an example of the type of canoe (tomoko) that Solomon Islanders of Western Province used during the war). Islanders throughout the islands were actively mobile, to the great advantage of coastwatchers and Allied forces (Bennett 2009: 27).  

Guadalcanal district officer and coastwatcher Martin Clemens was among the few district officers who, of his own will, chose to remain in the protectorate as a coastwatcher during the war. He noted in his diary that he sent his men as far as Tulagi, travelling in small canoes (Clemens 1998: 44). Aided by indigenous navigation skills, these small canoes were used to travel great distances and saved many Allied lives. When describing the canoes, Donald Kennedy stated:

the canoe used by the Solomon Islanders is cunningly built, but is not a plaything for the un-initiated. It’s like a bicycle — whether it works or not depends entirely on the person riding it. The Islanders themselves travel blithely to and fro in these flimsy craft with the unthinking skill of a cyclist, steering their few inches of freeboard safely through rolling seas (COI 1946: 18).

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12 See also Chapter 3 for discussion on the tropical island environment and diseases.
Islanders were readily available along coasts in their canoes. Every time an aircraft was seen to be encountering difficulties, they would paddle out to sea for an immediate rescue. They were instructed by their coastwatchers to rescue both Allied and Japanese soldiers. The rescue of United States Navy flyer Lieutenant J.G. Steussey was an example of such invaluable assistance. After being shot down by a Japanese Zero, Steussey’s bomber
crashed and he found himself paddling his tiny life raft to a strange shore. Remarkably, an islander sitting in his canoe saw him and swiftly towed him to shore; if he was spotted by a Japanese aircraft, his chances of survival would have been unlikely. Steussey related that islanders bandaged his wounds, fed him hot sweet potatoes and covered him with a blanket. He was then carried on a stretcher across the island to where he was transported back to Guadalcanal. Steussey recalled that ‘it was a long way over rough country’ (COI 1946: 32).

The stealthy operation of coastwatchers on and between rugged mountainous islands necessitated effective mobility and intelligence gathering. The teleradio type 3B or 3BZ (Figure 11) that coastwatchers used to transmit intelligence was designed for the Flying Doctor Service of Australia. It was designed to suit tropical conditions but was very heavy to carry. It operated by a six-volt battery with a separate charging motor and weighed over 100 kg. It required 12 to 16 islanders to carry it every time a coastwatcher relocated his camp (Clemens 1998: 40).

![Figure 11: AWA Teleradio 3BZ used by coastwatchers during the war](source: Australian War Memorial (P01035.006)).

Teleradios were not the only load to be borne when operating behind enemy lines. After Japanese occupation of Tulagi, Clemens’s scouts reported there were continuous visits to neighbouring Guadalcanal by Japanese forces. Clemens realised it would be a grave risk to remain at the
administrative station at Aola and decided it was time to move inland. On 19 May 1942, he evacuated Aola, eight days before Japanese troops landed at Tenaru on Guadalcanal. To ensure a lighter load for his carriers, Clemens paid as many workers as he could with the government’s silver in his possession, but the load remained heavy. Clemens needed as many carriers as he could get to quickly shift the entire station inland to Paripao, so he sent word around to the villages for men who would be willing to do the job. Labouring was not voluntary — islanders expected payment, and Clemens was well aware of this. He knew his life depended on his reputation among islanders, and one way to maintain goodwill was to ensure any labour recruits be immediately compensated with good wages. By 19 May 1942, Clemens had assembled 190 carriers and departed Aola, leaving only his trusted scout Sergeant Andrew Langabaea to run the scouting network in the area. He took everything he would need to maintain not only a coastwatching station but a skeleton administration as well, to uphold morale and maintain the government presence among local people. Among Clemens’s possessions was the district officer’s safe, which Clemens thought was too heavy to carry. So he emptied its load of silver coins and transferred them to a travelling safe, which still required four people to carry (Clemens 1998: 121). The safe was reported to contain £800 worth of silver (Lord 1977: 19).

But Clemens did not remain at Paripao for long. In early June 1942, Japanese troops landed on Guadalcanal in force to begin construction of the airfield. Again, Clemens and his scouts and carriers retired further inland for safety. At the Burns Philp rubber plantation at Lavoro on Guadalcanal, coastwatcher Rhodes also evacuated inland with his 24 scouts and carriers, while Macfarlane and Hay abandoned their position at Gold Ridge and moved south to Bombedea. These evacuations took place from early to mid-July during early Japanese developments on Guadalcanal.

In the western Solomons, similar relocations occurred. Solomon Alu, a scout, recalled the relocation of coastwatcher McKennon’s post from the vicinity of Mundimundi to a vantage point at Denggio. Alu remembered:

We carried everything up that hill. Those batteries for the radio were heavy to carry in the bush. We took roofing iron to build their house … we took iron from the Mundi house and from a house at Vatoro to make three houses, theirs [coastwatchers], ours [scouts] and a third for the radio itself. I think we had 27 Solomon Islanders up there (WPA 1988: 16–17).
After the United States Marines landed on Guadalcanal in August 1942, islanders on Guadalcanal, from Malaita and elsewhere in the protectorate, were recruited in large numbers to form the Native Labour Corps, while a few locals were incorporated into military units as artillery carriers. Coastwatchers became the recruiting agents for islanders during the war. Published records mostly mention Solomon Islanders only in passing, unlike the famous ‘fuzzy wuzzy angels’ of Papua New Guinea whose effort in the war become widely celebrated in written histories. Islanders were regarded as onlookers more than participants during the war, a viewpoint that will be discussed throughout the next chapters. Despite these representations, local oral recollections, photographs and testimonials from many of the combatants who served in the campaign indicate otherwise. A photograph taken on 10 October 1942 at Aola station, Guadalcanal, features one of Clemens’s trusted scouts, Selea, and a group of local carriers assembled with Lieutenant Colonel Hill and his troops prior to an attack on the Japanese garrison at Gorobusu (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Scout Salea (centre) and ammunition carriers (right) with Colonel Hill’s troops at Aola, Guadalcanal, 10 October 1942
Source: United States Marine Corps.

It is evident from the photo that islanders were enlisted to carry boxes of ammunition for the fighting force. This task does not feature prominently in the historiography as an islander contribution to frontline combat, yet it showed an active inclusion of islanders in frontline efforts with Allied troops. A similar image highlights islanders carrying crates along a trail on

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13 See also the film *Angels of War* (Pike et al. 1982).
the grassy plains of Guadalcanal (Figure 13). The photograph, produced by the United States Marine Corps during the war, indicates these islanders were carrying supplies. The original caption stated: ‘Lieutenant Colonel Carlson’s supply train winds across the grass plains on their return from a month-long expedition against the Japanese’.

However, the expectation of paid wages among islanders for any means of involvement was problematic for both the coastwatchers and fighting units, and local carriers were not always completely dependable. In a message to Clemens, Macfarlane complained that he had no carriers to assist in his evacuation inland and requested Clemens to send some of his carriers to do the job. Meanwhile, on 9 January 1943, 130 Guadalcanal carriers who were recruited by coastwatchers to assist the United States 147th Infantry Battalion (170 men) on a patrol to Vurai in the interior of Guadalcanal demanded an increase in their wages. Five days into the job, carriers engaged in a strike for higher wages, which resulted in the arrest of their leader (Laracy and White 1988: 141). It is fair to say that islanders were aware the tasks they were assigned to perform were significant to the success of the patrols, and the increase in money circulating among villagers when the Americans arrived increased islander expectations of higher wages when recruited to guide patrols or as carriers. Despite these complexities, the efforts islanders rendered to the Allied cause in terms of logistical support were indisputably significant.
Labour corps

When United States forces captured Guadalcanal and began to penetrate the western Solomons, fierce battles ensued. But the need for labour was not of immediate concern until three months after the occupation of Guadalcanal. On 30 November, the protectorate’s resident commissioner, William Marchant, officially endorsed recruitment for a Solomon Islands Labour Corps. The first cohort of islanders was recruited on Malaita and included six groups of 25 men each. These groups of recruits formed the majority of the first 200 native labour corpsmen who enlisted as privates and sergeants and were stationed at Lunga.14

Among these first 200 labourers was Isaac Gafu of Malaita. In his oral recollection, Gafu listed the labourers’ tasks as ‘unloading and carrying cargo, building airfields, and spraying the ponds to keep down malaria … also carrying ammunition for the army’ (Ngwadili and Gafu 1988: 207). In early 1943, the labour corps sections at Lunga were assigned to the Koli, Lunga, Tenaru and Kukum bases. Gafu, assigned to Koli base, recalled the labourers’ duties as guarding the fighter strip, loading ammunition and carrying cargo. He also describes an assortment of other tasks, stating ‘some went to do laundry, some went to work on lumber, and some went to work on gasoline’ (ibid.: 209). Jonathan Fifi‘i also affirmed labourers’ contribution to the war effort by stating:

Our work was to unload shells … we unloaded bombs and stacked them in piles. And we also unloaded cargo. We handled an incredible amount of cargo! All the food that they [the Americans] ate. We cleared trails for the Americans to travel on to reach the Japanese and fight with them. And we were bearers, carrying ammunition and guns and all the gear for the men. We carried them along, with the Marines when they were going to fight (Fifi‘i 1988: 223).

Labourers were exposed to continual Japanese raids on Allied bases at Lunga and the vicinity. Gafu described how the brutality of modern warfare was experienced when 11 islanders were killed and nine wounded in a bombing raid on 26 January 1943 at Lunga. To Gafu, the horror of this incident did not fade as his memory aged. He recalled that ‘when

14 Although military operations in the Solomons diminished from early 1943, Native Labour Corps recruiting continued to provide workers for clean-up operations, and by 1944 the corps had recorded a total recruitment of 3,710 labourers.
you hear the air raid signal, you must go into the foxholes. You must not stay above ground or you will die’ (Ngwadili and Gafu 1988: 208). In narrating the incident of 26 January 1943, he reiterated:

one day the Japanese bombed us and killed 60 of our people … every one of us quickly ran into the foxholes. The people who were killed by the bombs stayed above ground. They did not run into foxholes quickly enough (Ngwadili and Gafu 1988: 208).15

The bombing raid stirred up fear among the labourers. Gafu commented on their reactions after the bombing as they fled their camps at Lunga in the grip of fear and shock: ‘We ran away and did not care about work. We were afraid and stayed in the bush’ (ibid.: 208). In a telegram to the high commissioner of the British protectorate, Resident Commissioner Marchant reported a refusal to work after the bombing, predominantly among Malaita labourers (Marchant 1943b). These reactions contrast with a description in a booklet compiled by the Central Office of Information for the Colonial Office in 1946. Commenting on islanders’ contributions in the war, the booklet characterises islanders’ reactions to bombing as ‘displeasure rather than panic’ (COI 1946: 34). In comments on islander responses to the 26 January bombing incident, it stated:

Although this terrifying and entirely novel experience had a momentary effect on their morale, not one of the new recruits sought release from his undertaking to serve the Corps. Instead, they quietened their jangling nerves by digging extra foxholes (COI 1946: 34).

This assessment does not quite capture the nature of the experience as related by Gafu.

The role of women

Although direct involvement of islanders in the war was entirely among males, this left a gap in local communities. A shift in the balance of gender power occurred due to the absence of most men from their villages. As will be discussed in the next chapter, one of the lures for local involvement in

15 Note the discrepancies between Gafu’s figure of 60 casualties and the officially reported 11 deaths and nine wounded. This is perhaps due to an exaggeration or possibly a figure determined under trauma of the event. The official figure is from the resident commissioner’s report to the high commissioner.
the war was an increase in wage rates for islanders. This resulted in men migrating from their villages to seek labour opportunities at military bases, particularly on Guadalcanal and in the western Solomons (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Makira women and children watch as men from their island leave for labour corps work with the Allies on Guadalcanal, June 1943
Source: United States Navy, United States National Archives.

In the patrilineal societies of Malaita, the social structure was interrupted when large numbers of men migrated from their villages in search of paid labour. As David Gegeo documents for the Kwara’ae region, ‘women became more active in village leadership, taking on new roles’ (1991: 31). But Gegeo also reports that, at one stage, a group of Kwara’ae women ‘marched to government headquarters to demand that the Kwara’ae men who had been recruited for war service be returned to Malaita’ (1991: 31). This incident indicates the courage women summoned in the absence of their males to demand the government’s attention. A comparable example of women’s active participation in traditional leadership due to the absence of men can be seen in the wartime experiences of the people of Pohnpei, in the Caroline Islands of Micronesia. Although Pohnpei was not a centre of military activity as Guadalcanal was, most of the able-bodied men were recruited by Japanese military administrators for labour in Rabaul and elsewhere in the Pacific. In July 1943, over 170 Pohnpei men from Kitt
were recruited and sent to Kosrae as labourers. According to researcher Suzanne Falgout, who studied wartime experiences in Pohnpei, ‘Kitti women had been left behind to care for their families, farmsteads, and community’ (Falgout 1991: 124).

On islands like Guadalcanal where there was direct confrontation between Japanese and the Allies, women sometimes played an active role in protecting their men and the coastwatchers. Festus Butoa, an elder from Paripao who estimated he was about 12 years old during the war, recalled a time when the women of his village lured a few Japanese into a house with fruits and vegetables and kept them engaged while sending a warning to the scouts to seek shelter in the jungle (Butoa 2015).

On Malaita, as my grandmother recalls, all the women, children and elderly men of her village fled inland during the initial period of fighting on Guadalcanal and Tulagi. Most of the able-bodied men of the village were called by the ‘government’ to gather in Auki. For some families, both the father and oldest son left the village. Although everyone in the village looked out for each other, things were not the same. Women’s responsibilities doubled as they became the only guardian of the family in the absence of men (Ngwae’hera 2015). Such situations stretched traditional norms of the roles played by women, requiring them to fill the gaps left by their male counterparts, both within individual households and in the community.

**Conclusion**

Islanders were not bystanders in the war but active participants. They were recruited as guides for military patrols, they infiltrated, observed and reported on the Japanese, they rescued personnel; they were the primary (and often the only) communication link between coastwatchers, they provided the manpower that kept the logistical side of the campaign moving and they actively engaged in combat in several different units and modes of fighting. These varied contributions significantly aided the Allied victory in the Pacific War. Local recollections make it clear that the dangers endured by Solomon Islanders were no less than those faced by foreign troops. Islanders displayed great courage, and many showed great strength and skill in difficult circumstances. Despite the hardships and losses they endured, Solomon Islanders overwhelmingly remained true to the Allied cause until the end of the war in 1945. The complex reasons for this will be examined in the next chapter.
This text is taken from *Solomon Islanders in World War II: An Indigenous Perspective*, by Anna Annie Kwai, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.